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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: "NEWSWEEK" GOT IT WRONG ON KIMEP

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: In an on-line article appearing August 1, "Newsweek" magazine accused the Kazakhstani government of suppressing Western-oriented education at what is arguably the country's most prestigious university. The article reports that governments in Russia, Belarus, and Central Asia have cracked down on Western-educated professors and the spread of their "dangerous ideas," like democracy and freedom of speech. About Kazakhstan, "Newsweek" got it wrong. While there remain problems in the areas of democracy and human rights, Kazakhstan's admirable record in promoting Western education among its young people is not one of those areas. END SUMMARY.

13. (SBU) "Beware of Big Ideas" in the August 17 issue of "Newsweek" (published August 1) took aim at governments in the New Independent States (NIS), which reportedly have pressured Western-style universities that they accuse of imparting "dangerous ideas" to students who might lead so-called color revolutions similar to those that occurred in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan. Some of these governments are indeed suppressing Western-style universities in the NIS, but the article, covering universities in Central Asia, Russia, and Belarus, undermined its overall credibility when it went after Kazakhstan on this score.

14. (U) "The situation is probably worst at KIMEP" (the Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics and Strategic Research), the article averred, "which has laid off 30 Western professors and axed an EU-funded program on local government and political science." Quoting professors who allege they were fired for speaking out against the university's corrupt practices, the article dismissed KIMEP's claim that the professors were let go for financial reasons by noting the university "did manage to find \$10 million for a new building this year." KIMEP students, writes "Newsweek," know what really happened. Says one, "We were taught Western values of democracy and the meaning of freedom of speech. That doesn't fit the Soviet mentality of Kazakhstan."

15. (SBU) If "Newsweek" had done more research and fact-checking, it would have learned that KIMEP was started in Almaty by Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev in 1992 with the express purpose of

exposing Kazakhstani students to Western-educated professors. When the government-run university was approaching bankruptcy in 1997, it was turned into a private joint-stock company, owned 60 percent by its current president, Korean-American economist Chang Young Bang, and 40 percent by individuals in the government. (The university's funding comes from private sources, 90 percent from tuition.) When KIMEP earlier this year faced the possibility that Nazarbaev's own minister of education, Zhanseit Tuymebaev, would stand in the way of the university's reaccreditation, Nazarbaev himself intervened to maintain KIMEP's standing.

¶16. (SBU) For more than three years, KIMEP has been working closely with the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), which accredits such institutions as Harvard and MIT, to gain the prestigious association's accreditation of KIMEP. NEASC, which conducts annual, on-site reviews of KIMEP's progress, has recommended that the university, as one of the conditions for accreditation, sell all shares of the university and put the proceeds into an endowment. KIMEP is working towards this goal. After she visited KIMEP in 2008, Louise Zaks, NEASC's associate director, said, "I am impressed by [KIMEP's] accomplishments of the last two years. There's always room for improvement, naturally. . . . I engaged in some lively and . . . productive discussions all week. The faculty and students were vocal in their support of the institution and its vision."

¶17. (SBU) As to the charges leveled against KIMEP in "Beware the Big Idea," the biggest idea with which KIMEP was wrestling last year was a possible \$7 million shortfall due to projected declines in enrollment, rising salaries, and possibly losing two tax cases brought against the university by the government. The university won its cases in court and radically restructured its budget, laying

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off professors with the highest salaries and lowest number of students. Most of the 33 educators let go had Western degrees. Still, the university retains some 300 faculty, about a third of them with Western degrees.

¶18. (U) The \$10 million mentioned in the "Newsweek" article for a new structure was not "found" this year. It has been obligated in tranches over three and a half years under capital expenditures in KIMEP's budget, available online, for its new academic building.

¶19. (U) And the EU program that "Newsweek" reported KIMEP had axed? The university's public administration department currently teaches a local government course, which is not EU-funded. The only EU program KIMEP administrators can find in the institution's history is a course on local government funded through TACIS in 1999-2000 at KIMEP's College of Continuing Education. The course ran for one year and ended.

¶110. (SBU) None of this is to say that KIMEP, like most universities, does not experience bouts of internecine faculty warfare, questionable management, and student unhappiness over tuition hikes. Nor is Kazakhstan's overall education system free from serious corruption. But that's a far cry from alleging in "Newsweek," as does Alexei Malysenko from Moscow's Carnegie Center, that "Nazarbayev . . . is afraid that 'KIMEP graduates [will] join the opposition, and that is the reason behind the [firing of] Western professors.'"

¶111. (U) President Nazarbayev has no history of opposing Western-educated professors; on the contrary, he has always been strongly in favor of Western education. In addition to founding KIMEP, Nazarbayev in 1993 initiated the "Bolashak" ("Future") Program that seeks to place 3,000 Kazakhstani students at any given time at universities abroad, primarily in the United States and Europe, at government expense to prepare a new generation of non-Soviet leaders. Currently, 3,034 students are studying abroad on the program, according to its administrators. Since the program began, 1,514 students have graduated from U.S. programs, and 871 students are currently enrolled at American universities. In privately funded education, Kazakhstani enrollments at American universities have risen steeply.

¶12. (U) President Nazarbayev also has appointed a more progressive rector at Kazakhstan National University in Almaty, and the Ministry of Education and Science is building the Astana New University, scheduled to open this fall, which will employ Western professors to teach engineering and technology solely in English. Further, Nazarbayev stood behind recent legislation that makes it easier for foreign professors to teach in Kazakhstan by eliminating the need for work permits in the field of education. (Stemming from the WTO negotiations, the new legislation still needs to be vetted by the Ministry of Education and Science.)

¶13. (SBU) We know from private conversations with senior U.S. journalists that there is a degree of dismay about the "new Newsweek" that has chosen "big-picture" articles over traditional reporting of the news. We would wish "Newsweek" hadn't thrown out the baby of fact-checking with the bathwater of traditional on-the-ground reporting. The problem with this article is that too many who read it without inside knowledge will accept it as accurate. It is not. "Newsweek" got it badly wrong about Kazakhstan's KIMEP.

HOAGLAND